

# Healthier Options at Food Shelves: The Open Door's Healthy Food Policy



*Through their Health Equity in Prevention (HEiP) initiative, the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota awarded contracts to 13 organizations working to implement policy, systems, and environmental changes to support health and advance health equity. The “Advancing Health Equity through Policy” series highlights the policy work of HEiP-funded organizations by highlighting key policy implementation steps, early impacts, barriers or challenges, and other important lessons learned.*

## How are healthy food policies being used by food shelves in Minnesota?

Healthy food policies are written statements that outline an organization's commitment to offering healthy foods. In food shelves or pantries, these policies can be used to change donation and sourcing practices to help ensure residents have access to healthy food options. Few food shelves in Minnesota and across the U.S. have formally adopted healthy food policies. In Minnesota, policies have been adopted by The Open Door, the Brian Coyle Center, The Food Group, Volunteers Enlisted to Assist People, and Fruit of the Vine. This summary focuses on the work done by The Open Door, a HEiP-funded organization, but includes lessons learned through interviews with other local organizations and stakeholders.

## The Open Door: The path to a healthy food policy

The Open Door is a nonprofit organization that operates food shelves providing 1.4 million pounds of food each year and serving 5,500 food insecure individuals each month in Eagan and Lakeville, in Dakota County, Minnesota. Offering nutritious foods that support health and well-being has been a core value of The Open Door since its founding in 2009. Over time, The Open Door has developed a number of programs and policies that demonstrates its commitment to these core values.

In 2010, The Open Door affirmed its value of offering healthy, fresh foods through the establishment of the Garden To Table® program. The program provides families with the resources they need to grow their own food, such as garden plots, plants, tools, and training, allowing clients to exercise choice and control over the foods they grow and consume. This program was soon followed by the Mobile Pantry®, a retrofitted bus stocked with fresh, healthy food, which travels to designated communities to bring food to those who lack transportation. Through its food shelves, The Open Door started sourcing a growing percentage of fresh food. At the end of 2011, an estimated 50 percent of the food was fresh/perishable. That number increased to 70 percent by 2012.

In May 2013, The Open Door's Board of Directors decided to explicitly confirm its commitment to offering healthy foods by adopting a healthy food policy that committed its food shelves to: offering a high percentage of fresh and perishable food; removing food with low or no nutritional value from food shelves and food drives; offering healthy food choices at staff meetings, events, and volunteer engagement activities; committing to engaging the public in a healthy, equitable, and sustainable food system; and advocating for policy, systems, and environmental changes around food justice in the hunger relief community and beyond.

The policy has led to notable changes in the types of food The Open Door makes available to clients. After implementing the policy, The Open Door no longer distributes: pop or sugar-added beverages; candy; bakery sweets (donuts, cake, cookies, and pastries); ramen noodles; chips and other salty bagged snacks; and canned pasta. The policy states that it is committed to offering: fresh whole foods, such as fruits and vegetables, milk, cheese, eggs, meats, and poultry; foods with high and healthy

nutritional values; and low-sugar, low-sodium, low-fat, and whole-grain items whenever possible.

## Motivation for the policy: Improved health and increased access

Interest in a healthy food policy stemmed from The Open Door's values that recognize the impact of food on health and well-being. Some of The Open Door's clients have chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes that could be better managed with improved diet. In addition, many lower-income clients do not readily have access to healthy foods, either due to a lack of grocery stores or limited healthy food options at local convenience stores or other food retailers. The cost of healthy foods is also a major barrier that The Open Door is working to address. In a recent survey, The Open Door's clients identified cost as the number one barrier to purchasing healthy foods. By improving food access and affordability, The Open Door's policy is one important step for reducing health inequities based on income.

## Key challenges to implementing the Healthy Food Policy

As the Healthy Food Policy was implemented and The Open Door began to expand its offerings of healthy, fresh foods it encountered several challenges:

- **Eliminating individual choice.** While the policy was largely received with support from residents and local stakeholders, some individuals questioned the impact of the policy on clients' individual choices. They asserted that the policy removes their ability to choose the types of foods they want and that The Open Door was being too paternalistic in attempting to control what clients could choose. In

response, The Open Door reframed the discussion by focusing on equity. Staff countered that many of their low-income clients do not have access to grocery stores that supply healthy foods or cannot afford the healthy food options that are available, but that snacks and sugar-added beverages are often more readily available in a wider variety of stores. Therefore, they are expanding residents' choices by making it easier for them to access healthy foods. In addition, The Open Door operates a client choice model in which clients select their food at the food shelves similar to shopping at a grocery store.

- **Sourcing healthy foods.** The Open Door also encountered the challenge of changing their sourcing to increase the amount of healthy food they could provide to clients. It developed multiple approaches to sourcing, including:
  - Healthy food drives with businesses, schools, and local faith partners.
  - Farm purchasing pilot program in which The Open Door connected with local farms and Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) to purchase fresh produce.
  - Retail rescue or partnering with local grocery stores to obtain healthy foods that are being removed from store shelves.
  - Working with major food banks such as The Food Group and Second Harvest Heartland to prioritize receiving healthy foods. The Food Group has been an asset in providing specific produce such as potatoes, apples, carrots, onions, and oranges for purchase.
- **Obtaining more coolers, freezers, and storage space.** As The Open Door began providing

more fresh foods, it required additional coolers and freezers to hold perishable foods. It worked with local community organizations such as the local Rotary and Lions Clubs to receive mini-grants or in-kind donations that helped the organization quickly expand its coolers and freezers.

- **Deciding what types of foods to source.** Before adopting the Healthy Food Policy, The Open Door staff spent a year researching what types of foods they wanted to focus on in the policy. They used the federal dietary guidelines, also known as MyPlate, to guide the policy and their decisions about sourcing food. For example, when purchasing food or soliciting donations, they prioritize brown rice over white and whole-grain options over refined flours.

### The impact on food shelf clients

After the Healthy Food Policy was adopted, The Open Door surveyed a selection of its clients to measure their satisfaction with the fresh foods offered at the Eagan food shelf, as well as their overall support for the Healthy Food Policy. Staff discovered that over three-quarters of the 166 clients surveyed (78%) were aware of the Healthy Food Policy and most (88%) agreed with it. In addition, over half (55%) noticed that there were different foods available at the food shelf. Most clients (86%) were also satisfied with the various foods available through the food shelf and requested more fruits, vegetables, dairy, and eggs.

The Open Door staff recognizes that helping clients access food is only one step in the process of improving eating and health behaviors. Through their Garden to Table Program® they offer community gardeners opportunities to increase

their food literacy and nutritional knowledge by connecting them to cooking demonstrations and trainings. Staff are also in discussion with The Food Group, a local food bank, about how food shelves can help connect their clients to healthcare providers and improve their knowledge about the relationship between diet and chronic disease.

## Complementary efforts in Minnesota

While this summary focuses on the work done by The Open Door, it is important to note a few other complementary efforts happening at other local food shelves that are also focused on increasing access to affordable, healthy food. Increasingly, local governments and public health departments are looking to support the development of healthy food strategies including the creation of policies. In 2012, the Minneapolis Health Department (MHD) formed the Minneapolis Healthy Food Shelf Network to help increase the amount of healthy food available through food shelves and food banks. Part of the network's focus has been on helping to develop formal healthy food policies. With funding support through the Statewide Health Improvement Funding, MHD is offering training and technical assistance to help network partners draft and adopt healthy food policies.

There are other organizations throughout the state that offer assistance to organizations interested in adopting healthy food policies. The University of Minnesota Extension published a resource guide that includes information on developing policies, sourcing healthy food, storing food, and other key components of offering healthier foods in food shelves. The Food Group, a local food bank, developed the healthy food policy toolkit with guidance from MHD. The toolkit includes an overview of policies, worksheets, a guide to

prioritizing healthy foods, and a copy of the Food Group's healthy food policy. Recently, The Open Door has provided technical assistance and training to groups outside of Minnesota. It led a healthy food policy workshop with Access of West Michigan, a network of food shelves in the Grand Rapids area. As a result of that training, three food shelves are working on developing policies. It also led a policy workshop with the Houston Food Bank.

At least one local organization has identified the need for culturally-appropriate foods and is developing and adopting healthy food policies. The Brian Coyle Center, located in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, has a specific section of its policy noting that the center serves a diverse number of people with various cultural food preferences. The policy lists healthy foods that are acceptable and unacceptable for the Oromo, Somali, and Karen communities. These lists of preferred foods are created with input from community residents. The policy also noted that herbs and spices, a key element of East African cooking, should be made more available.

## Suggestions or ideas for organizations considering a healthy food policy

The Open Door identified a number of lessons learned that might be helpful for organizations considering a healthy food policy:

- **Weigh organizational readiness for adopting a policy and increasing healthy food options.** A staff member at The Open Door underscored how food shelves need to carefully weigh their organization's readiness to adopt a healthy food policy and increase the amount of healthy foods they provide. She shared that The Open Door spent a year laying the ground work for its policy by researching the types of healthy

foods it would source, securing buy-in from its stakeholders, and slowly increasing its freezer and storage spaces. An organization may not be ready for a formal, comprehensive policy as a result of limited infrastructure, lack of support from stakeholders, or hesitancy in creating a formal policy that may limit donations. While The Open Door's policy clearly identifies foods that it will not accept and provide through its food shelves, other organizations interested in developing a healthy food policy do not need to ban specific types of food. They can convey an organization's intentions to reduce unhealthy foods and provide more healthy options. There are also other small steps organizations can focus on in a healthy food policy, such as sourcing more fresh foods through retail rescue and connecting to community gardens, farmers, or farmers markets. In addition, organizations can provide more education on the intersection between diet and health and barriers to accessing healthy foods among individuals with lower-incomes.

- **Consider various options for sourcing healthy foods.** Organizations need to investigate multiple avenues for sourcing healthy foods. The Open Door sources healthy foods from food banks and food drives, connects with local farmers and CSAs, supports community gardens that supply their food shelves, and holds food drives that focus on soliciting specific healthy foods.
- **Communicate with stakeholders.** Food shelves and pantries are usually nonprofits or operate under a nonprofit organization (i.e., part of faith-based or civic organizations). As a result, food policies are generally adopted by a board of

directors or other nonprofit governing body. Given that these policies could be designed to explicitly eliminate certain types of food from sourcing and donation, it is critical to secure the support of all stakeholders involved, including board members, clients, staff, volunteers, and donors in the process of developing and adopting policies. The Open Door developed a strong communication plan to inform their volunteers and donors about their policy and the inclusion of more healthy foods through emails, press releases, signage, trainings, feedback sessions, and other engagement activities. Staff also worked on strengthening their capacity to talk with media about the policy and the organization's interest in advancing health equity.

- **Gather feedback about healthy food policies.** Organizations that implement policies intended to increase access to healthier foods should gather feedback or collect data on the impact of the changes they have made. This can be done through tracking of donations and total inventory, as well as surveys, focus groups or informal one-on-one conversations or observations. The Open Door gathered input and feedback from their food shelf clients through a series of surveys that asked about awareness and satisfaction of their Healthy Food Policy, suggestions for additional healthy foods, and barriers to accessing healthy foods. The Open Door used the data from these surveys to improve its operations and articulate the impact of the policy to those outside of the organization. A staff member reported that the data they collected was particularly helpful in speaking with those who were wary of the policy's impact on client choice or whether it would be supported by clients.

## Policy strengths and challenges at-a-glance

In this Health Equity through Policy series, we are using a broad framework to assess the policy’s anticipated strengths, as well as challenges to effective implementation. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be needed to assess the policy’s long-term impact and effectiveness.

Criterion	Key question	The Open Door’s Healthy Food Policy
Effectiveness	What is the likelihood of this policy achieving its stated goals and objectives?	The implemented policy has dramatically changed the types of foods available to food shelf clients, increasing the availability of healthy food options.
Equity	Is there fairness or justice in the distribution of the policy’s costs, benefits, and risks across population subgroups?	The implemented policy helps lower-income clients have greater access to healthy foods. Clients were able to provide feedback through the survey administered by The Open Door staff.
Efficiency	Does the achievement of program goals or benefits outweigh the costs?	Upfront costs were needed to secure other sourcing options, to communicate changes in policy, and to implement new programs. A formal cost-benefit analysis has not been conducted.
Liberty	To what degree does this policy restrict privacy or individual rights and choices?	The Open Door feels strongly that this increases options for clients interested in having healthier food options. Opponents to the policy have argued that the policy limits individual choice for clients and residents who make donations.
Political feasibility	To what extent do elected, appointed, or governing officials accept and support the policy?	The Open Door staff and board of directors are fully supportive of the policy, while external support has been mixed, primarily around perceptions of the policy’s impact on individual liberty.
Social acceptability	To what extent is there public acceptance and support for the policy?	The Open Door did face some initial resistance and developed a proactive communication plan to inform the public and local stakeholders about the rationale for the policy. Surveys completed by The Open Door show a majority of clients support the policy. In addition, some local hunger relief organizations felt the policy would alienate their donors and affect their fundraising; however, The Open Door found that their food and fund donations did not decrease and that they actually attracted new donors as a result of the policy.
Administrative feasibility	What is the likelihood that the organization can implement the policy well?	The Open Door has been successful in implementing the policy. Ongoing communication will be needed to inform residents and organizations about the types of foods they can donate to the food shelf. Additional sourcing partners may be needed to respond to changes in demand. The Open Door is also providing technical assistance to other hunger relief organizations in Minnesota, Michigan, Texas, and California that are interested in healthy food policies
Technical feasibility	Is the technology needed for policy implementation available and reliable?	The Open Door has not identified any technology needs that are critical to the implementation of this policy.

**Adapted from:** *Public Policy: Politics, analysis, and alternatives*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, by Michel E. Kraft and Scott R. Furlong

## Sources consulted and resources

Everyone Needs Healthy Food Presentation. Retrieved from:

<http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcms1p-128074.pdf>

Minneapolis Health Food Shelf Network. (2013). Meeting notes. Retrieved from:

<http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcms1p-116357.pdf>

Minneapolis Healthy Food Shelf Network. (2013). Intro to Healthy Food Policies. Retrieved from:

<http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/wcms1p-116360.pdf>

The Food Group. Healthy Foods Policy Information: <http://thefoodgroupmn.org/agency-corner/71-2/>

The Open Door. (2014). Fresh News. Retrieved from: <http://theopendoorpantry.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/THE-OPEN-DOOR-HFP-survey-results-online-6-14.pdf>

University of Minnesota Extension. (2014). Promoting Healthy Eating at Food Shelves. Retrieved from:

<http://www.extension.umn.edu/family/health-and-nutrition/toolkits-and-resources/healthy-food-access/food-shelves/docs/guide-full.pdf>

## Wilder Research

Information. Insight. Impact.

451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700  
[www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)



AMHERST H.  
WILDER  
FOUNDATION  
ESTABLISHED 1906

Here for good.

### For more information:

The Open Door: Lisa Horn | 612-767-9163 | [lvetaw@northpointinc.org](mailto:lvetaw@northpointinc.org)

Wilder Research: Nick Stuber | 651-280-2763 | [nick.stuber@wilder.org](mailto:nick.stuber@wilder.org)

Prepared by Wilder Research on behalf of the Center for Prevention at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota.